12 The community as a source of pragmatic input for learners of Italian: the multimedia repository LIRA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on community participation within the LIRA project – Lingua/Cultura Italiana in Rete per l'Apprendimento (Italian language and culture for online learning). LIRA is a multimedia repository of e-learning materials aiming at recovering, preserving and developing the linguistic, pragmatic and cultural competences of second and third generation Italians living abroad. The paper addresses a crucial issue in teaching pragmatics, namely, how to combine the intrinsic variability of this area with the need to employ a standard reference system and to provide clear corrective feedback to learners. Can user experience, interaction, and active participation in the community foster collaborative knowledge and develop pragmatic competence?

Keywords: Web 2.0, community, informal learning, pragmatics, Italian as a second language.

1. E-learning web 2.0

Over the past decade, mass access to the internet, with the development of new tools and platforms and the spread of social networking, has come to enable language learners to be globally connected. The term Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005)

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has increasingly become used to represent a different use of the web where users have an active role in the production and sharing of content. Web 2.0 is composed of applications that facilitate communication, and promote interaction and cooperation among users, allowing the creation of web communities where each individual is user and author at the same time. This transformation has also changed e-learning models and environments: the term e-learning 2.0 (Downes, 2005) is now used with regards to the modes and the practices related to the use of the web for e-learning. E-learning 2.0 aspires to recover and promote the potential within the spontaneous and informal modes of web use (Bonaiuti, 2006), both by individual learning and by building networks of experts and communities of interests, which aggregate and interact spontaneously to find solutions for specific issues.

The rise of Web 2.0 platforms, tools and communities has meant that learners and users can not only access a wealth of language material online, but can also take part in online communities which produce their own content and share their experiences, hence emphasising learner autonomy and creating further learning opportunities.

In this paper, we analyse some of the informal modalities of interaction and participation developed by the user community in LIRA, in particular, the extent to which, in learning environments characterised by Web 2.0 technologies, the sharing of resources, experiences and knowledge amongst individuals effectively promotes a socially built learning experience.

2.   The LIRA repository

The main goal of LIRA[2], an inter-university project funded by the Italian Ministry of Higher Education and Research, is to create a multimedia repository which can assist Italian speakers born and/or living abroad to develop/recover

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2. lira.unistrapg.it

their linguistic and pragmatic competences in the language. The repository aims to:

- satisfy the interests of those individuals who are motivated to maintain and recover their linguistic and cultural roots, or to achieve specific social and/or professional goals that involve (re)approaching the Italian language/culture;

- support the work of teachers of Italian as a second language and of Italian culture abroad;

- establish a centre of aggregation, albeit virtual, for Italians and learners of Italian abroad, promoting the development of communities of interest and practice.

In defining the structure of the repository, we drew up a list of key characteristics for a learning environment of this type, which should:

- encourage knowledge construction relating linguistic and cultural content to context;

- avoid oversimplifying the complexity of real situations;

- present language use in specific real contexts, avoiding generalisation and abstraction;

- provide multiple representations of reality;

- promote knowledge construction through cooperation and exchange with others.

The digital content in the repository is characteristic of contemporary Italian. We have selected authentic materials which show language being used within real interactions, and allow a large number of variables to be taken into account.

The content is grouped into 13 macro-areas: seven aimed at the development of pragmatic-linguistic competence (e.g. the capacity to make linguistic choices that are consistent with the context); and six aimed at strengthening social and cultural competence (showing how social and cultural factors are reflected in communicative practices). Each macro area contains a series of units focusing on a particular pragmatic and/or cultural issue.

The structure of the repository provides the user with a controlled linear modality, following a sequence recommended by the authors, and a free modality, passing from one unit to another or from one macro area to another at will. Each unit contains a flexible number of activities which are designed to make the user aware of the variety and variation of language uses illustrated in that unit. Through the correction of these activities and the feedback received, it is hoped that users will better understand the relationships between communicative forms and functions in different contexts. This is why LIRA provides various types of materials for various types of users, and allows various types of interaction and comparison.

Thanks to the framework made available, each user can become an actor and author of content which is exchanged and shared with the rest of the community in a collaborative participatory process. LIRA is based on the constant interaction between the different participants in the virtual community (including native and non-native speakers) to create content and share their language experience and knowledge. At any time, users can enter the repository, and in addition to using the materials and carrying out the activities, they can exchange views and information; through their contributions, participants make available to other users their knowledge and skills which contribute to the process of collaborative construction of knowledge (Manca & Sarti, 2002) which "directly affects the actors involved in the interaction and, indirectly, the whole community" (Mazzoni, 2005, p. 54; my translation).

In implementing LIRA, we referred to the model of the 'community of learners' theorised by Brown and Campione (1990), with the aim of going beyond the idea of the school/classroom as a place where knowledge is merely transmitted,

to develop a learning environment based on communities of practice and on knowledge construction, where the community acts as a group working together and joining forces to produce new knowledge. In the field of language learning, this means that knowledge is not simply assimilated but constructed thanks to deeply contextualised resources and activities, and dialogue exchange (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1993): problem solving (e.g. agreeing, negotiating, resolving conflicts, making suggestions, apologising), explaining points of view, reporting personal experiences, and understanding other users' opinions.

In such communities, learning is active and collaborative, and diversity (sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, geographical origin, etc.) becomes a resource to be valued and shared. It enables the community to increase through mutual exchange: each user acts in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) of others. In the context of a community of practice (see inter alia, Lave & Wenger, 1991), any participation of the individual, even if marginal or peripheral, is legitimate. In a group of learners, where communication is horizontal and among peers, even those with less experience are eligible to participate and to access the resources of the group.

The technological evolution of communications media has greatly expanded the possibilities for aggregation and comparison among people. Socialising, collaborating, and cooperating on the web projects the individual into a new dimension where the normally defined boundaries of physical environments become increasingly vague, revealing new opportunities for learning. With the use of computer technologies, the concept of community, i.e. a group of people who "have a common interest, that is to say they share a common destiny, and communicate with each other on a regular basis" (Rheingold, 2001, p. 212; my translation), becomes open to a virtual dimension. Preece (2001) lists the following elements as characteristic of such communities:

- the presence of individuals who interact socially to meet their personal needs;

- a common purpose (an interest or need to exchange information);

- a policy that governs behaviour, in the form of tacit assumptions and rules that guide the interactions between individuals;

- online systems which can support and negotiate social interaction, encouraging the development of a sense of membership.

From this perspective, LIRA has been used to support communities of learners operating at different levels: among learners of Italian in order to develop or improve their linguistic-pragmatic competences, among teachers of Italian as a second language to provide materials and elements of reflection for use in classes, among native speakers of Italian to meditate on less typical uses of their language, and as a means for exchange and discussion amongst the international community of learners and native speakers of Italian.

3.   An example

To the user, LIRA takes the form of a social network rather than a simple repository, presenting users with an environment where they can take full advantage of the potential of the web. The following example illustrates some of the modes of cooperation that can support the expression, representation, processing, and sharing of knowledge in LIRA communities.

All the didactic units in LIRA are integrated into discussion areas (forums) where learners are stimulated to talk about their linguistic and cultural experiences, and to ask questions and offer opinions on the materials and the activities proposed. Numerous studies document how the interaction in online forums can support the process of collaborative knowledge construction (Muukkonen, Hakkarainen, & Lakkala, 1999; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994), and involve users in three dimensions (cognitive, social, motivational) that are crucial to the success of the learning process (Wilson & Whitelock, 1997). Every participant tries to respond by expressing personal ideas, assumptions and interpretations in a kind of theoretical elaboration where the idea of one individual is evaluated by others. Through discussion,

requests for clarification, and negotiation of the proposals of other users, suggested hypotheses can be refined and shared knowledge improved. These trends are evident in various LIRA discussion forums: for example, Zanoni (2014) describes a community debate on the use of the formal and informal Italian personal pronouns *tu, voi* and *Lei*, in particular on the use of *voi* and *Lei* from a regional and generational perspective. The forum we shall examine here concerns the Italian exclamation *Complimenti!*. According to the authoritative Treccani (2014) online dictionary, it's most common use is to express "admiration and praise for the addressee, positively assessing their physical appearance, character, skill, possessions, or also expressing appreciation" (n.p.; my translation). In the forum entitled "A compliment to tell you …", users first relate to this meaning of the exclamation:

> "Compliments are made primarily on physical appearance, on a sports or professional performance etc., achievements, and births".

However, in everyday use the exclamation can take on other meanings. It can be used ironically, for example, to express opposition or reproach. This second meaning is reported and integrated into the discussion on the forum, thereby allowing the community to reconsider and expand their knowledge (cited contributions from the forum are my translations from the original Italian):

> "I also think that in Italian you say 'Complimenti!' when you do a nice thing or an important event occurs. However, once I got to work late and my boss told me 'Complimenti! I asked you to arrive early today'… Well, probably I did not understand. Your boss did not want to congratulate you, but to tell you off (for being late). We often use the same expression 'Complimenti!!', but with a different tone, to be more or less ironic depending on the occasion or the context. Yes. Exactly… it was a telling off not a compliment!!! It is like saying 'congratulations' or 'thank you so much' in an ironic way to a person who promised to do something for you, but has then changed their mind and not done it. I was thinking that, in addition to the ironic meaning, sometimes when we say 'complimenti!' we express our disappointment with someone's behaviour or actions".

Through such discussions, the user, driven by their own interests (e.g. understanding the variation in the meaning of *Complimenti!* according to the circumstances) can actively build up a personal idea of reality by integrating the perspectives offered by the rest of the community. Here we can see how a problem is overcome through the 'person presents problem – community offers solution' procedure. But at the same time, we can see how new lines of discussion develop, new doubts develop, and the processes of investigation and knowledge construction continue.

In addition to using the LIRA forums, members of the community can also turn to social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google+) to stimulate re-elaboration of the learning process (see e.g. Deng & Yuen, 2009). These allow them to return to previously treated issues in a critical manner, further developing particular topics. Such experiences outside the platform broaden the context for informal reflection, in an area where in order to present ideas, it is also necessary to select and organise material, and to summarise the main concepts at issue (Parmigiani & Pennazio, 2012).

The main innovative aspect of LIRA, however, lies in providing multiple feedback. The user can compare answers given by community members from different sociocultural groups, or by native and non-native speakers. As a repository, LIRA is mainly designed for self-learning, and so it is primarily through the correction of activities and the feedback received that users must understand the links between forms, functions, and contexts. Because of the nature of language use, it is often difficult to give learners a single right answer, nor is it possible to exemplify possible uses exhaustively. For this reason, the materials are designed to suggest a range of different reference models to users of the platform, related to what Italians of different ages, sexes, and perhaps of different geographical origins, have said or written in the situations presented in the activities. In this way, the user is stimulated to reflect on the ways in which different pragmatic meanings can be attributed to an expression like *Complimenti!*. LIRA allows users to compare their answers not only with the solutions proposed by the authors of the activities, but also with the answers of other native or non-native members of the community, where the latter are

selected as having similar socio-biographical features to those listed by the user when registering on the platform.

The informal strategies provided on the platform are particularly appropriate with respect to 'marked' language uses, such as the use of a compliment as a rebuke, or as an ironic insult, and in cases where users can report personal learning experiences (e.g. use of slang or dialect, linguistic and cultural stereotypes, and misunderstandings of the formality or informality of the context, etc.). Collective discussions like the one cited above offer opportunities to increase users' awareness of phenomena which we can consider central to learning the pragmatics of a second language (Bettoni, 2006).

4.   Conclusions

LIRA is a learning tool, which illustrates how today's technologies can provide users with the means to respect each other's individualities, emphasising personal characteristics and peculiarities, and allowing learning both in independent space-time and within a community which offers ongoing ideas and materials for reflection.

Promoting the social dimension of e-learning allows us to re-consider the potential of online platforms like LIRA, which can not only distribute content but also support interaction at a distance. Such informal e-learning, which has its roots in web 2.0, can provide a motivational and relational environment which may be able to self-sustain for considerable periods of time, supporting users during the consolidation of their foreign language competences and the deepening of their sociocultural knowledge.

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